

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

Please amend Claims 1, 14, and 20-22 and cancel Claims 12 and 13.

1. (Currently Amended) A method of preparing or modifying a cheese or cheese-like product comprising mixing into a cheesemaking mixture or product, a heat-killed ferment of an exopolysaccharide-producing-microorganism without separating the exopolysaccharide from the other components of the ferment, wherein the microorganism is selected from lactic acid bacteria.

2. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the heat-killed ferment is directly mixed into a cheesemaking mixture.

3. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the heat-killed ferment is mixed into an ingredient used in making the product.

4. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the heat-killed ferment is ferment prepared using a lactose-rich medium and an exopolysaccharide-producing-microorganism.

5. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the microorganism does not hydrolyse lactose, and the ferment comprises an added lactase or galactosidase enzyme or an organism which produces an enzyme which hydrolyses lactose.

6. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 4 wherein the medium contains more than 1.0% (w/v) lactose.

7. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 4 wherein the lactose-rich medium is a fraction of milk.

8. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 7 wherein the fraction is serum or mother liquor; or raffinate or breakthrough derived from milk or skim milk or buttermilk or whey or serum or mother liquor or permeate; or permeate derived from milk or skim milk or buttermilk or whey or serum or mother liquor or raffinate or breakthrough.

9. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the microorganism is a food-acceptable microorganism.

10. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 8 wherein the lactose-rich medium comprises a dairy permeate.

11. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 10 wherein the dairy permeate is a milk permeate or a whey permeate.

12. (Canceled)

13. (Canceled)

14. (Currently Amended) A method as claimed in claim 11 wherein the microorganism is selected from ~~Lactobacillus delbrueckii ssp bulgaricus; Lactococcus lactis ssp cremoris; Lactococcus lactis ssp lactis; Streptococcus salivarius ssp thermophilus; Lactobacillus casei ssp casei; Leuconostoc mesenteroides; Lactobacillus helveticus; Lactobacillus reuteri; Lactobacillus rhamnosus; Lactobacillus plantarum and Lactobacillus sakei~~ Lactobacillus delbrueckii ssp bulgaricus; Lactococcus lactis ssp cremoris; Lactococcus lactis ssp lactis; Streptococcus salivarius ssp thermophilus; Lactobacillus casei ssp casei; Leuconostoc mesenteroides; Lactobacillus helveticus; Lactobacillus reuteri; Lactobacillus rhamnosus; Lactobacillus plantarum and Lactobacillus sakei.

15. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein fermentation is conducted at a temperature of 20-35°C.

16. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 14 wherein the fermentation is incubated for 16-240 hours.

17. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 15 wherein the mixture is fermentation incubated for 60-120 hours.

18. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the ferment is heated and spray dried.

19. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein ferment is heat-killed and mixed directly with a dairy product.

20. (Currently Amended) A method of modifying a milk protein concentrate comprising adding to the concentrate a heat-killed ferment of an exopolysaccharide-producing microorganism without separating the exopolysaccharide from the other components of the ferment, wherein the microorganism is selected from lactic acid bacteria.

21. (Currently Amended) A method of preparing a cheese or cheese-like product comprising the steps of

(a) adding to a cheese milk, a heat-killed ferment of an exopolysaccharide-producing-microorganism without separating the exopolysaccharide from the other components of the ferment, wherein the microorganism is selected from lactic acid bacteria;

(b) adding a proteolytic enzyme to the mixture;

(c) collecting the resulting curd;

(d) further processing the curd to produce a cheese or cheese-like product.

22. (Currently Amended) A process of preparing a cheese or cheese-like product comprising the steps of

(a) providing a cheese precursor mixture comprising milk proteins

(b) adding to the cheese precursor mixture a heat killed ferment of an exopolysaccharide-producing-microorganism without separating the exopolysaccharide from the other components of the ferment, wherein the microorganism is selected from lactic acid bacteria

(c) providing conditions under which the product gels.

23. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 22 wherein the conditions of (c) are provided by cooking the mixture to denature milk proteins and allowing the mixture gel.

24. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the product is a cheese.

25. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the product is a processed cheese.